

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON ROBERTO BURLE MARX, A UNIQUE PERSONALITY.

Sima Eliovson

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South Africa.

Abstract

Biographical notes are given on Roberto Burle Marx, the Brazilian landscape architect and artist. Some of his better known projects are enumerated and his use of Brazilian and other tropical plants in dramatic landscape design is discussed. It is demonstrated that plantsmanship and creativity based on abstract art forms combine with architecture and social need in the works of Burle Marx.

Biographical Notes

Son of a Portuguese Catholic mother and a German-Jewish father, Roberto Burle Marx was born in 1909 in São Paulo and went to Rio de Janeiro with his family in 1913 as a young boy. His horticultural career began when he learned about plants from the women of his family. His mother loved flowers and his so-called "second mother", Ana, who lived with his family, grew all manner of vegetables. A cultured immigrant from Hungary, she taught Roberto to love plants and grow them. She remained in Roberto's home after the death of his parents, where he still cares for her with tender consideration at her great age of 102.

As a youngster of 15, Roberto sold his vegetables and used the proceeds to import plants from Europe, trying exotics like tulips and hyacinths, and learning what would thrive by trial and error. When he went to Europe in 1928 for 2 years, in order to study painting in Berlin, he discovered the magnificent flora of Brazil at the Botanic Garden, Dahlem. Returning to Rio in 1930, Roberto began his career as a painter in the National Academy of Fine Arts, Rio, studying under Leo Putz and Cândido Portinari, and continued with his hobby of gardening.

Projects

Some two years later, being rather pleased with a colour combination of foliage, he invited Lucia Costa, an architect and city planner who lived nearby and had known him since childhood, to come and see his garden. Impressed, Lucia Costa asked him to make a garden for a family called Schwartz in Rio, which he completed in 1932. He was then commissioned to plant a city square in Rio. His painting career flourished at the same time and he had an exhibition in Pernambuco, where he went in 1934, remaining there for about 3 years. He designed his first public garden in a square in Recife, as well as the water garden of Casa Forte and Bemfica cactus gardens. The Ministry of Education and Culture in Rio had originally been designed by the architect Le Corbusier, who supplied rough drafts which were then developed by Lucia Costa and a team of architects, including Oscar Niemeyer. Roberto Burle Marx was asked to design gardens at ground level and on the 2nd and 15th floors in 1936, which were his first public gardens in Rio. In 1937 he received the Gold Medal for painting from the National Academy of Fine Arts, and designed the garden for Sr Alberto Kronforth at Theresopolis, Rio, Fig. 1. The roof garden of the Brazilian Press Association in Rio was designed by Burle Marx in 1940, and the following year saw some of his paintings and drawings included in an exhibition of Brazilian art staged at the Royal Academy, Burlington House, London. The gardens of the Park of Pampulha, near Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais were designed and executed by him in 1943, and the Park of Araxá in the same state was also designed by him in collaboration with the botanist Henrique Lahmeyer de Mello Barreto, who took him on many botanical excursions into the wilds. There he studied how plants live together in association in their natural surroundings, and increased his knowledge of the rich flora of Brazil. Only 19 of the 25 sections of the Araxá Park were ever completed.



Fig. 1. The Kronforth Garden, *photograph courtesy of Verlag Gerd Hatje.*



Fig. 2. The Odette Monteiro Garden, photograph courtesy of Verlag Gerd Haije.

In 1946 he staged an exhibition of his paintings in São Paulo; in 1948 was exhibited in the Brazilian section of the Venice Biennial, and in 1952 had a retrospective exhibition of paintings and landscape designs in the Museum of Art, São Paulo. His designs for the theatre in 1947 for 'As Aguas' in Rio, and in 1953, for Stravinsky's ballet 'Petrouchka' in São Paulo, demonstrate his versatility.

In 1946 he also began the design of the Odette Monteiro Garden, Correia, Petrópolis, the private garden he designed for Odette Monteiro. It features plants in bold groups making a strong statement in the immense landscape; a valley encircled with vast domes of black rock scattered with native bromeliads and bordered with indigenous trees. A huge flowing bed containing thousands of yellow "Day lilies" (*Hemerocallis*) leads from the house down the sloping lawns and directs the eye to the central lake he created in the bowl of the valley. Plants of botanical and horticultural interest border the lake, with stepping stones taking one across from one side to the other. Purple azaleas, crinum, striped ribbon grasses and purple *Iresine* grow in happy juxtaposition, with enough interest to whet the appetite of the plantsman, yet forming a tranquil picture to be enjoyed from the house. The simple pathway extending along the right hand hillside is drawn with the bold assurance and verve that only an artist could achieve and leads the eye into the distance, Fig. 2.

Between 1947, when he returned from a trip to Europe, and 1954 he designed a number of memorable private gardens in which his bold, fluid, massed plantings featured, gardens such as those of Sr Carlos Somló (1952) and Sr Alfredo Baumann (1953) of Itaipava, Rio State; Sr Cavanelas (1954), Pedra do Rio, Petrópolis, Fig. 3; and Sr E. Waller (1954) of Rio. Between 1947 and 1951 he created a number of tile and mosaic garden walls, such as those of Sr O. Gomes (1951) of São José dos Campos, but later in the decade, concrete decorated walls were made, such as that for Sr F. Pignatari (1956) of São Paulo, some incorporating decorative water effects.

Burle Marx's large projects began in 1952 when he designed the gardens associated with Santos Dumont Airport as a first module in a series along the Bay of Rio; the Beira Mar project to be co-ordinated later in 1962. He completed the 'Botafogo' in 1954, the 'Aterro du Gloria' including the Museum of Modern Art and Monument of the Expeditionary Corps of World War II between 1956-61, and the 'Flamengo' in 1964. These comprise some of his best known works in the sixties. The black and white mosaic sidewalks he designed in 1970 along the "Avenida Atlantica", bordering the 'Copacabana Beach' in Rio, known as the 'Aterro de Copacabana' were meant to provide a changing pattern for the passing motorist and to relieve monotony by creating movement to the eye. Looking down on these designs from apartments above the street, one sees a flowing abstract design complementing the waves of the nearby sea. Plants are not forgotten, for there are groups of 4 or 5 palms punctuating the pavements, sometimes interplanted with other groups of trees that thrive by the sea, such as the tropical "Indian Almond" (*Terminalia catappa* L.) with its red summer foliage.

In 1953, he won the prize for landscape architecture at the 2nd International Exhibition of Architecture, which formed part of the São Paulo Biennial festival, and in the same year produced designs for landscaping of Galeão Airport on Governors Islands; the new campus of the University of Brazil in Guanabara Bay, and the gardens of the American Embassy in Rio.

He was appointed Professor of Landscape Design in the School of Architecture, University of Brazil in 1954, visited America and Cuba on a lecture tour, and opened his first American one-man exhibition at the galleries of the Pan-American Union, Washington. In the same year he designed the garden of the Jaquera Chapel, Recife, Pernambuco. The following year he visited Europe, sponsored by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on an invitation from the Institute of Contemporary Arts, holding an exhibition in London. Also in 1955 he designed the Guimarães Gardens, Copacabana, Rio. The design for the roof garden of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio dates from 1956.



Fig. 3. The Cavanelas Garden, photograph courtesy of Verlag Gerd Haije.

Burle Marx designed the gardens of the Brazilian pavilion at the Brussels International Exhibition of 1958. The design for the landscaping of the University of Brazil Faculty of Architecture, and its roof garden date from 1960.

Burle Marx's best known work in Venezuela started as early as 1954 when he designed the park of the Hotel Pico de Avila, in Caracas. In 1958 he designed the garden of Sr Inocente Palacio in Caracas (Fig. 4) although, in the preceding year, his involvement with the Parque del Este in Caracas first started. This is a central park with concentrations of plants among the skyscrapers in the centre of the city and principally in roof gardens. The buildings are not yet finished, but the plans are done and the plantings will come later.

Roberto Burle Marx has worked with many famous architects while constructing his gardens, notably Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Eduardo Reidy and Ruy Otaki. Since 1964 he has participated in the design of the Government Buildings in Brazilia through the magnificent gardens surrounding them — masterpieces of design, sculptural quality and structure, with interesting plant materials.

At the Palace of Justice in Brazilia, he uses giant, grey-leaved *Vriesia* in bold groups to contrast with flowing purple masses of the groundcover *Setcreasea*. Huge clumps of *Philodendron* shelter under shaded areas overhung by falling waters pouring over crescent-shaped concrete basins which scallop the facade of Niemeyer's building. Lesser plants would be overwhelmed by the massive architecture, but Burle Marx's philodendrons compliment it.

His rock forms grouped in the lakes outside the Ministry of War, 'Praca Triangular', represent the semi-precious stones of Brazil. They are sculptural groups in themselves, reminiscent of the elemental 15-stone garden at Ryoanji in Kyoto, Japan, but very much a creation of Burle Marx's own imagination, with a contrast of tranquil waters backed by tall palms and broken by stretches of water plants like the "Water Poppy", *Hydrocleys*.

The Winter Garden at the 'Itamaraty Palace' in Brazilia is a tropical indoor garden featuring plants from the Amazon, including the sculptural form of *Ceiba erianthos* K. Schum., with its beautiful thorny stems. Three of Burle Marx's tapestries hang in the Banquet Room of this 'Palacio dos Arcos'.

Important works by Roberto Burle Marx presently in progress include a pavilion, intended primarily for sporting activities, featuring flowers and plants, to be set in a large park in Brazilia. People will be able to walk through it and enjoy the flowers. He is also planning a Civic Centre in Curitiba, Parana, which is 900 m above sea-level and has a cold season, and a sea-front planting with mosaics and sub-tropical trees at Florianopolis in Santa Catarina.

He is taking part in a large team project to afforest the zone of the badly polluted Tietê River in São Paulo. This will cover 600 hectares and be the largest green area in the city.

Style and materials

Roberto Burle Marx is a man of many talents, developed from an early age, partly by the circumstances of his life. His name conjures up an instant reaction among those who have seen or heard of his works in Brazil, which have become world famous. One could say, without fear of contradiction, that he is one of the greatest living landscape architects of our time and has exerted more influence on the development of contemporary gardens than any other designer. Many landscape architects have produced great works in the past few decades, but Roberto Burle Marx is an innovator, exhibiting a rare combination of artist and plantsman, having an architectural understanding, yet never being so dominated by structures that he forgets his plants in their endless variety. At a time when landscape architects are apt to concentrate more on the architectural lay-out of a garden than on variety of plant material, when specialisation amongst nurserymen is leading to more limited choice of plants, when designers are apt to choose a handful of "easy-care" plants and weave



Fig. 4. The Palacio Garden, *photograph courtesy of Verlag Gerd Hatje.*

them into low-maintenance, often dull compositions, sometimes through lack of knowledge about the plants themselves, Burle Marx gardens shine like stars. They are filled with choice plant materials, arranged with drama, beauty and an understanding of artistic principles, using plants and inorganic materials, such as stones and water, that complement each other. There are also touches of fantasy in his gardens, helping to create an emotional effect which is his ultimate intention.

He uses plants and colour to convey moods and utilises those species which have architectural qualities. The large leaves of many Brazilian and other tropical plants provide him with ideal subjects. Plants with striking appearance always intrigue him and he uses them in order to accentuate character and emphasize structure in a garden.

His gardens are meant to create movement, with changing vistas at every turn, emphasized by flowing lines and colours. The movement of people is directed through the plants. Falling water is introduced into his gardens as often as possible, as much for its sound as for its movement.

Like an architect, Burle Marx does not design gardens in a two-dimensional manner. One cannot judge his gardens by looking at one of his plans, any more than a house may be judged by its floor plan. He sketches elevations and makes drawings that bring his designs to life. He first makes a rough draft, with many drawings and paintings so that the draftsmen and architects in his office may interpret his wishes and translate them into working plans. He chooses the plants, supervises each garden and exercises control over all the work. The two chief architects who work in collaboration with him are Jose Tabacow and Haruyosni Ono.

Burle Marx is deeply concerned about the preservation of nature in Brazil and is appalled at the destruction of plants that is taking place. People owning large tracts of land in the Amazon are indiscriminately destroying native plants in the name of agricultural development, and upsetting the eco-system. A glance at the hillsides around his home bears witness to the trend of destroying the natural vegetation in order to plant fruit of commercial value. Few native trees have been retained as far as the eye can see. He is always speaking to newspapers and appealing to the public to preserve the natural flora, but there are no comprehensive laws to implement these aims. No permits are required to collect plants. Anyone can go into the interior with a truck and collect as much as they like.

Roberto Burle Marx has collected specimens in the past and financed many expeditions himself, living in the forest and encountering hostile tribes. He knows of the difficulty of financing expeditions to collect wild plants. His collection is unique and he is deeply concerned about what will happen to it when he is no longer able to care for it. He is frequently asked to sell it but cannot bear the thought of its being broken up. His plant collections in his garden represent a National Treasure and funds should be made available to preserve it for the people of Brazil and the world.

His garden is like a botanical garden, with collections of plants from all over Brazil. He grows an extensive collection of *Philodendron* (over 430) and his name is commemorated in *P. burle-marxii* G.M. Barroso. He also owns a huge collection of *Heliconia* which are striking plants with dramatic flowers and foliage, and his name is commemorated in *H. burle-marxii* L. Em. Begonias, anthuriums, alocasias, orchids, bromeliads, ferns — all tropical plants with magnificent foliage and flowers have a place in Burle Marx's collections, not to mention the splendid flowering trees and palms from other climatic zones of the world.

People continually make the pilgrimage to his *sítio*, a farm of 142 hectares, situated about 60 km from Rio, in order to visit his nursery and garden. He has a remarkable lath house, covering several hectares, which contains many rare and beautiful plants. Visitors have to be restricted or his nursery would be overrun. Landscape architects, architects and botanists are equally welcome guests and he likes nothing better than to see a circle of

friends, young and old, around his dining table on a Sunday to share with them the delights of his garden. He loves people about him, seeking out those with similar interests and appreciation. He believes that curiosity about flowers, birds, nature and beautiful things forms the basis of life and makes it fascinating.

The plant-lover who takes a walk around the grounds may suddenly find chandeliers of delicate scarlet blooms hanging from *Amherstia nobilis* Wall., or white or pink waxy *Clusia* blossoms festooning these large evergreen trees from the Amazon, blooming in early summer. Their rounded buds above the foliage give them the common name of Onion-of-the-Forest. The Rose of Venezuela, *Brownea*, thrives in his garden, and the pale pink canopy of *Cassia grandis* L. rises high above the garden in early summer and may be seen from afar. *Victoria amazonica* (Poeppig) Sowerby spreads over a new lake in the garden, but Roberto does not forget to show me, in a corner, a fairly rare Water Crinum *C. campanulatum* Herb., from South Africa, that I sent him.

Striking plants move him to compose arrangements in the garden in order to reveal their maximum beauty. He will place a giant rosette of *Aechmea*, with smooth, tawny leaves, beside the grey, spiky curled spiral foliage of the South African *Encephalartos horridus* (Jacq.) Lehm. His desire to display the exotic, pendent green sprays of the Jade Vine, *Strongylodon macrobotrys* A. Gray inspired him to design a special courtyard as a suitable setting. A high concrete trellis overhead, that throws a pattern of slanting shadows on to a paved floor, encloses a tranquil pool that will reflect the colour of the Jade Vine above it. This pool is bordered by beds carpeted with small decorative bromeliads such as *Cryptanthus zonatus* (Vis.) Beer. Fish will move in the water and feeding trays hung for hummingbirds will bring life to the scene. Only by knowing the characteristics of this climber and using his artistic skill could he picture how the strange turquoise flowers in their thousands will sway in the slightest breeze dropping into the water and onto the paving, to form a memorable spectacle for the onlookers. He has planned the viewing area on a verandah overlooking the courtyard, where one may sit and enjoy the scene. Massive ledges constructed from old stonework rescued from demolished buildings, hold water and can be fed from three spouts so that they produce the sight and sound of running water at the turn of a tap. The high supporting wall of a pergola is festooned with staghorn ferns hung on wooden frames, and may be watered from the top by means of trickle irrigation through a clever arrangement of thin pipes, the water percolating through each layer of plants as it might do in a dripping forest. The back of the courtyard is open to a background of trees in the garden, affording a view of the trunk on an immense Fig Tree (*Ficus*), with giant bromeliads, *Vriesia imperialis* Morr. ex Baker strategically balanced near the base.

Burle Marx has a sense of fun and fantasy, demonstrated by papier maché sculptural forms placed on the paving of a courtyard. These are in the shape of a series of columns, of varying heights and widths, painted in black and white to compliment the white tiled floor and the striped shadows from the roof. Later, he explained, he would remove them. He felt that there is nothing wrong with having sculptures made of papier maché if one could protect them from the rain, or in being able to move sculptures around whenever one felt like it. Change is what makes a garden dynamic and interesting, varying in appearance from time to time.

His home is a reflection of his artistry and his fascination with Brazil, containing collections of native artifacts as well as natural objects of beauty. He has collections of Brazilian ceramics set into glass-fronted recesses in the walls of his living rooms and passages, each arranged in harmonious groups. There is very old pottery in one recess; modern glass in another; figures from old churches in yet another. Primitive beige and orange clay pots in the form of figures and animals from La Vallée du Jequitinhonha stand on wide shelves. Massive wooden entrance doors, taken from an old church, will be restored and painted to match the other woodwork in traditional Portuguese style. One of his huge paintings dominates a massive sideboard, made from an old altar, featuring a collection of antique crystal sugar bowls.



Fig. 5. Roberto Burle Marx, photograph by Sina Eliovson.

Lavish flower arrangements decorate the house. A huge bowl of flowers in season dominates the dining-room. During winter this consists mainly of red *Bixa* fruits and pale green massed seedheads of *Kalanchoë*, while, in the summer, the more exotic pink torch-lilies or scarlet heliconias will be featured. Pillars of dried material frame the doorway leading to a music room, composed of masses of brown raffia seeds, clusters of brilliant red *Bixa* fruits, golden puffs of dried flowers of *Stiffia*, with dried rosettes of small *Tillandsia* and the papery seed-heads of *Blighia*. Tall pedestals in the corners of an outdoor room feature long fronds of ferns trailing to the floor, (*Polypodium subauriculatum* Bl.).

The rear entrance to the house is flanked by a group of beautiful specimens of *Nolina recurvata* (Lem.) Hemsl. a tall Mexican plant of strikingly graceful form and character. Large rounded river-stones lie in groups in simple, rectangular beds alongside the flagstone paths, bordered by several kinds of bromeliad and philodendron, dominated by an immense, spreading Red Silk Cotton Tree (*Bombax ceiba* L.), always a subject of interest with its red flowers and bronze new leaves.

It is impossible to think of Roberto Burle Marx (Fig. 5) without thinking of exuberant flowers and dramatic foliage. He is surrounded by them on all sides and has made them part of his environment. No one but he has used the glorious flora of Brazil to such effect, and although he uses Brazilian flora he also enjoys using beautiful plants from all over the world. He is an artist, whose paintings and drawings hang in many art galleries and public buildings in Brazil and Europe. Many of his paintings and tapestries seem to be inspired by the magnificent tropical foliage of Brazil; they seem to invoke the atmosphere of the forest, revealing stark bands of light on huge leaves, reflecting brilliant blues and greens from the shadows, conveying abstract forms of trunks, twisted lianes and other living shapes in their

composition. He is always seeking to improve the quality of his own thoughts and surroundings. His philosophy permeates his work and he quotes Le Corbusier, who said that one needs to be surrounded by objects of poetic emotion. His collection of ceramics and other art objects, his floral composition in his house, all bear witness to this desire which is part of his personality.

Virtually a legendary figure in his own lifetime, Roberto Burle Marx combines all the attributes of a man of great talent with those of a man of great warmth. He is sensitive to the feelings of others, unprejudiced and judging people only as to whether they are good. He is generous to a fault, full of imagination and humour and sometimes mischievously ironic. Above all he is always thinking of the people who will live, move and relax in his gardens; fighting for the preservation of plants in nature, educating people to enjoy a greater quality of life through plants, thrilled at the discovery of a new plant or flower above commercial considerations. Despite his prominence in a double career of artist and landscape architect, he lives in a simple manner. Financial success is used to maintain his large staff and garden. Whenever he can he develops new ideas in his garden, always seeking to create new beauties. Whatever his setbacks may be, he rises, ebullient as ever, to the challenge of the moment. He needs the stimulation of his friends, while they, in turn, are stimulated by him and his love of life.